DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 129 167 HE 008 255

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TITLE New Expectations for Fair Practice. Suggestions for Institutional Review.
INSTITUTION American Council on Education, Washington, D.C. Office of Academic Affairs.
PUB DATE Sep 76
NOTE 26p.
AVAILABLE FROM Office of Academic Affairs, American Council on Education, One Dupont Circle, Washington, D.C. 20036.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$2.06 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Admission Criteria; College Students; Communication Problems; *Conflict Resolution; Degree Requirements; Grievance Procedures; *Higher Education; Recordkeeping; *School Policy; *Student College Relationship; Student Financial Aid; *Student Needs; Student Records; Student Recruitment; Vocational Counseling
IDENTIFIERS *Fair Practice

ABSTRACT

In view of changing expectations about fair practice, a variety of voluntary initiatives are now needed, and the American Council on Education urges that all institutions systematically review their current procedures and, where necessary, improve them to ensure fair treatment for students. This document is intended to help institutions review current policies and practices affecting students in eight areas of institutional activity that have recently come under criticism: official publications; admissions and recruitment; financial assistance; recordkeeping; instructional programs and requirements; career counseling; grievance procedures; and student services and student conduct. The examples of good practice offered in each of these areas are neither required nor recommended. They simply illustrate approaches that some institutions have found suitable to their circumstances. Emphasis is on effective communication and the principle of fair practice. (LBH)

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ED129167

NEW EXPECTATIONS FOR FAIR PRACTICE

Suggestions for Institutional Review

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American Council on Education

Washington, D.C.

Published September 1976

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AMERICAN COUNCIL ON EDUCATION
Roger W. Heyns, *President*

The American Council on Education, founded in 1918 and composed of institutions of higher education and national and regional education associations, is the nation's major coordinating body for post-secondary education. Through voluntary and cooperative action, the Council provides comprehensive leadership for improving educational standards, policies, and procedures.

FOREWORD

The issue of fair practice in postsecondary education has received considerable attention recently, in the context of broad allegations that catalog statements misrepresent actual offerings, that specific obligations are not fully disclosed, and that the legitimate rights of students are ignored. Federal officials, prompted by reports of the fraudulent use of federal student-assistance funds, have already promulgated regulations requiring that postsecondary institutions follow certain practices with respect to tuition refunds and information disclosure. Other regulations and actions have been proposed.

The American Council on Education supports and affirms the need for fair practice and for accurate, effective communication in institutional behavior toward students. We believe that instances of poor practice should be corrected and, further, that problems of ineffective or outmoded practice can best be corrected by voluntary initiatives on the part of the academic institutions themselves. Governmental action should be directed toward the relatively few cases of fraudulent or criminal abuse that call for governmental penalties, both civil and criminal.

In light of changing expectations about fair practice, a variety of voluntary initiatives are now needed, and the Council urges that all institutions systematically review their current procedures and, where necessary, improve them so as to ensure fair treatment for students. We are also asking the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation to take the lead in developing a model code of good practice that might be applicable to all colleges and universities as a statement of an institution's responsibilities toward its students. In the interim, this paper has been prepared to assist in the process of institutional review: It offers some perspective on the issues and some examples of good practice. While recognizing wide variation in institutional conditions and customs, we hope that each institution can usefully adapt these examples to its own circumstances through a thorough and conscientious reassessment of current practice.

Roger W. Heyns, *President*

Colleges and universities have traditionally developed a variety of procedures to help students get the most from their postsecondary education experience. Some practices -- such as freshman orientation sessions, academic advising, and student handbooks -- are virtually universal. Other mechanisms -- such as campus hot-lines, ombudsmen, and "drop-in" counseling centers -- have been developed in response to particular institutional conditions.

Whether these and other existing practices meet the present-day needs and expectations of students is, however, increasingly being called into question. Some observers claim that colleges and universities are failing to provide sufficient information to prospective students. Alleged instances of misleading information or neglect of student rights have been widely publicized. Moreover, because of job-market uncertainties, institutions are under pressure to provide information on employment prospects in each field of study. Student-initiated lawsuits, as well as complaints directed to state officials and legislators, raise other disturbing questions.

Any given problem may involve only a few institutions, but the underlying issue -- whether colleges and universities have become unresponsive to legitimate student needs -- affects the entire academic community. In light of this concern, it is important that all institutions take steps to affirm their commitment to fair treatment of students. Current policies and practices should be reviewed, and procedures improved wherever necessary. Institutions should also consider ways to clarify and make more explicit the terms of the social contract implied by the student's agreement to attend and the institution's agreement to instruct.

Each has rights and obligations that should be mutually understood. To promote that understanding, the institution is responsible for being as thorough and precise as possible in describing what policies it has chosen to follow and what it expects from students regarding their rights and responsibilities.

This document is intended to help institutions review current policies and practices affecting students in eight areas of institutional activity that have recently come under criticism:

I. Official Publications

II. Admissions and Recruitment

III. Financial Assistance

IV. Record Keeping

V. Instructional Programs and Requirements

VI. Career Counseling

VII. Grievance Procedures

VIII. Student Services and Student Conduct

The examples of good practice offered in each of these areas are neither required nor recommended. They simply illustrate approaches that some institutions have found suitable to their circumstances.

In the review of current procedures, two general principles of fair treatment should be given attention:

Effective communication: the provision of complete and accurate information on all pertinent aspects of institutional policy and practice. Essentially calling for "full disclosure," this principle applies both to the prospective student's need for

accurate information in making decisions about college enrollment and to the enrolled student's need to be fully informed about the requirements affecting program completion.

Fair practice: the maintenance of responsible and fair procedures in all administrative matters affecting students. This principle entails institutional responsibility to provide efficient administrative services, to "deliver" services and programs as described, and to maintain adequate channels for hearing and resolving grievances.

Both principles apply to a wide range of procedural relations between institutions and students. In reviewing present practices in light of these principles, institutional officers will need to address several practical matters: How can the adequacy of present practices be assessed? What additional or revised procedures will be both workable and effective? And how can the responsibilities of students be better defined and communicated?

A broadly coordinated review may be necessary to consider such matters and to develop a new consensus on the meaning of "fair and effective practice." A joint committee, consisting of students, faculty, and administrators, might be designated to weigh alternative approaches and to decide on proper balances between institutional and student responsibilities.

Each institution can best translate the spirit of the suggestions offered here into policies and practices suited to its own circumstances and student population. It is hoped that this document will facilitate review as a step toward effective institutional response.

I. OFFICIAL PUBLICATIONS

Fair practice implies careful attention to the accuracy of the information provided in all official publications intended to tell students about the institution, its offerings, and its requirements. Such publications include college catalogs, student handbooks, and course schedules, as well as all recruitment materials.

Manuscripts of publications should be carefully reviewed to ensure that the material is accurate and up-to-date and that the language can be readily understood by prospective students. Special care should be taken to avoid misleading statements about institutional offerings and requirements, whether by omission of important details, use of academic jargon, or failure to note restrictions.

Examples of Good Practice

The following illustrations are offered as exemplary procedures that might be adapted by each institution to fit its own particular circumstances.

- Establish committees to review manuscripts of catalogs and other publications to ensure that the information provided is accurate and up-to-date on all basic terms of enrollment, including program offerings, tuition charges and other financial obligations, and requirements for academic progress. Any special requirements, exceptions to policy, or restrictions in stated offerings (e.g., enrollment limits, courses offered only in alternate years) should be clearly stated.
- Have students review catalogs and other publications to identify ambiguous or misleading statements and to indicate topics that require fuller explanation.

- o Review institutional statements of objectives to assure that general descriptions of the institution, its purposes, intellectual environment, and student culture are balanced and restrained. Any statement about the uniqueness or superiority of the institution should be adequately supported and should not make or imply inaccurate comparisons with other institutions.
- o Attempt to give a realistic image of the institution, including its strengths and limitations, and of typical student experiences. Institutional research data might be used to describe general student characteristics and experiences (e.g., the proportion who live in campus housing, fail a first-term course, major in certain fields of study).
- o Develop separate brochures, or sections of catalogs, to provide particular subgroups -- e.g., part-time students, transfer students, returning adults -- with adequate information on institutional offerings and regulations applicable specifically to them.
- o Identify and clearly explain all academic terms that may not be readily understood by prospective students (e.g., accreditation status, distinctions between degree and certificate programs, differences between regular and adjunct faculty, residency requirements).
- o Review the catalog's effectiveness as a guide to institutional regulations for enrolled students. Opportunities available only to advanced students or special procedures applicable only to enrolled students (e.g., change of major, leaves of absence) should be adequately described.

II. ADMISSIONS AND RECRUITMENT

Institutions should review their admissions practices to ensure that all pertinent application requirements are clearly explained and that adequate regard is shown for efficient processing of applications and timely notification. Recruiting materials -- especially films, brochures, posters, and advertising copy -- should be assessed for accuracy and balance: They should effectively "tell the college's story," but also should provide true images and pertinent facts. Continuing efforts should be made to assure that all admissions staff members have accurate, up-to-date information about the institution and its educational program.

Examples of Good Practice

The following illustrations are offered as exemplary procedures that might be adapted by each institution to fit its own particular circumstances.

- Review the clarity and accuracy of existing descriptions of admissions requirements, application procedures and deadlines, and notification dates regarding acceptance.
- Offer clear explanations of any special admissions criteria, tests, or other procedures by which incoming students are assigned to remedial instruction. Students required to take remedial work should be fully informed of its type and length and of any restrictions on enrollment in regular courses while they are enrolled in remedial courses.

- Provide applicants with statements of institutional policies governing use of waiting lists for admissions, methods of appealing admissions and financial-aid determinations, and procedures for reapplying or for applying for second-term admissions.
- Develop techniques (e.g., training sessions, periodic review of educational programs) for keeping admissions staff members abreast of changes in the institution's programs and facilities.
- Establish informal mechanisms for peer-information exchange. Prospective and enrolled students might be given opportunities to talk with one another, or student-written accounts of the academic environment and campus life might be made available to prospective students.
- Include a statement encouraging prospective applicants to review pertinent sections of the complete catalog in cases where pamphlets and other short materials cannot cover all the basic information that students need to know about an institution.
- Provide statements, in catalogs or separate notices, about institutional policies governing transferability of credit from other institutions, credit for experiential learning, or use of the College-Level Examination Program and other examinations. Such statements should also cover institutional policies about the terms under which courses taken several years previously would be accepted as part of current degree work.

III. FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Institutions should provide prospective and enrolled students with the best possible information and advice regarding probable costs, types of financial assistance, and the financial obligations they assume when they enroll at the institution or accept particular types of financial assistance. Tuition costs and other fees should be fully described, particularly when charges vary according to program, level or type of study, or student status. Insofar as possible, students should be notified of likely additional costs, such as special equipment or laboratory fees. The terms for refunding tuition or housing charges and for waiving certain requirements should also be clearly explained.

Students should be clearly informed about all types of financial assistance for which they are eligible. The various types of assistance might be specifically compared, with the advantages and limitations of each highlighted and any restrictions outlined. Such comparisons should distinguish among institutional sources and independent or governmental sources of assistance.

Examples of Good Practice

The following illustrations are offered as exemplary procedures that might be adapted by each institution to fit its own particular circumstances.

- Provide careful and complete statements of necessary procedures, deadlines, and notification dates in applying for financial aid. A separate effort may be required to inform enrolled students about procedures relevant to them in applying for financial assistance.
- Review descriptive statements and application forms for financial aid to ensure that students are given clear and precise information on the financial obligations of enrollment.

- o Develop brochures or leaflets that explain to prospective students -- in terms readily understandable to them -- the advantages, limitations, and specific obligations of each type of financial assistance.
- o Distinguish clearly between financial aid offered from institutional resources and financial aid offered by federal, state, or other noninstitutional sources that are available to students at almost all postsecondary institutions.
- o Initiate new efforts to guide students in realistic financial planning. For instance, estimates of the likely costs of books, laboratory equipment, fieldwork expenses, and so forth, might be developed. Case examples of such costs might be drawn from the experience of other students. Descriptive data on previous classes could be collected and disseminated (e.g., proportions receiving various types of financial assistance, average amounts of aid received from each source, typical aid packages, earnings from part-time jobs).
- o Review institutional policies and official statements on refunding tuition and fees and, where necessary, develop policies that provide for an equitable return of payments when students withdraw and for adequate notification of procedures in applying for a refund.
- o Develop, and make widely available to prospective and enrolled students, policy statements explaining how changes in academic status (e.g., change from full-time to part-time study; transfer to another institution; termination of studies) affect the terms of the student's financial obligations.

IV. RECORD KEEPING

Institutions should ensure that student records are accurate, up-to-date, and secure. Efficient procedures should be maintained in handling records and in providing students with reasonable access to their records. Formal statements explaining institutional policies with respect to student records and accounts might be developed and made widely available to students; such statements should describe the institution's procedures for maintaining the confidentiality of records and should outline the limited conditions under which disclosure can be made.

Complaint or appeal mechanisms should be available for resolving difficulties that students may have concerning their records. The student's right to challenge, and request correction of, information should be made clear. In turn, institutional staff should be trained to administer correctly all policies governing student access to records and challenges relating to their records.

Examples of Good Practice

The following illustrations are offered as exemplary procedures that might be adapted by each institution to fit its own particular circumstances.

- Develop a policy statement, made available to all students, that describes procedures whereby students may gain access to their official records and accounts and affirms the institution's responsibility to resolve promptly all questions about possible errors in the records. Such a

statement should include a summary of the terms and requirements of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (the Buckley amendment).

- o Establish periodic review of current practices to assure efficient procedures in keeping student records accurate and up-to-date.
- o Review procedures for keeping records and accounts to assure that only pertinent information is maintained.
- o Provide students with published schedules showing the amount of time required under institutional procedures for transmitting transcripts, changing records, and recording the previous term's work.
- o Develop a policy statement affirming the confidentiality of student records and explaining clearly the conditions of their disclosure. Such a statement might include examples of situations in which records will be released to authorized persons.

V. INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAMS AND REQUIREMENTS

Institutions should effectively inform students about the full range of program options available to them and about all institutional and departmental requirements for academic progress and program completion. Descriptive materials should note special programs and opportunities to waive certain requirements. Fair practice also requires that students be given adequate notice of any changes in requirements or programs. Insofar as possible, such changes should not unduly impede the academic progress of students already enrolled. Informal complaint mechanisms should be readily available, possibly within each department, to students who have complaints about their programs, instructors, grades, or other academic matters; students should be informed of these mechanisms and encouraged to discuss their grievances initially through these channels.

Examples of Good Practice

The following illustrations are offered as exemplary procedures that might be adapted by each institution to fit its own particular circumstances.

- Review current procedures to ensure that students are fully informed about program offerings and requirements for completion of studies.
- Provide clear explanations of the options available for students to fulfill program requirements by means other than those normally followed. Such means might include individually planned majors, credit for experiential learning, and substitutions among course requirements to fit particular interests.

- Develop statements, at the department level, describing each program of study in terms of teaching methods, learning objectives, research interests and professional competencies of faculty, or its distinctive emphasis. Such departmental statements might incorporate institutional research data on students in each department: their skills, interests, learning achievements, and competencies gained.
- Follow principles of fair practice regarding the status of students who are affected by changes in, or elimination of, academic programs. Such policies should make explicit how the rights of enrolled students would be safeguarded when such changes are made.
- Inform students of the possible academic and financial consequences of interrupting their studies. Such information might include statements of institutional policies for reapplying and returning to studies, of requirements for completing particular courses in sequence, and of stipulations about the time allowed for making up uncompleted work.
- Establish informal mechanisms whereby students may discuss complaints or academic problems. Such mechanisms might include a special advisor in each department.

VI. CAREER COUNSELING

As part of its program of career counseling, each institution should make continuing efforts to provide students with reliable and up-to-date information on the careers in which they express interest. Career-counseling programs should be directed toward giving students a realistic picture of the employment market in particular fields; such a picture might include projections of probable demand as well as current information on the nature of entry-level positions, on typical lifelong career and earning patterns, and on the educational requirements for each occupation.

Statements describing the services offered in the institution's career-counseling or placement program might be developed and made available to all students. Such statements should accurately describe the nature and extent of the services and should note any charges for particular services and any restrictions in offerings.

Examples of Good Practice

The following illustrations are offered as exemplary procedures that might be adapted by each institution to fit its own particular circumstances.

- Provide interested students with accurate, up-to-date information on the employment prospects for college students majoring in various fields of study. Such information might include summaries of the job-finding experiences of recent graduates and the interpretation of findings from recent surveys and projections.
- Help students develop career-planning skills that can be useful to them throughout their adult lives. Career-information materials might emphasize

the practical steps to be taken in making career decisions, the diverse career patterns that people often follow, and the value of contingency planning and of investigating previously overlooked career options.

- o Hold training sessions for students interested in job-seeking techniques and planning for initial employment.
- o Develop accurate and detailed statements that explain the services available to students from the institution's career-counseling or placement program, noting fully any services that are available only to certain students or that carry an additional charge.
- o Develop descriptive materials on the effectiveness of the institution's pre-professional and other career-oriented programs in helping students realize their occupational objectives. Such materials might include data on recent graduates (e.g., the proportion in each program who enrolled for advanced study or who found employment in the appropriate field; the proportion who later changed their career plans or who did not complete the program).
- o Review and strengthen possible relations between the institution's career-counseling activities and its academic advising.
- o Offer vocational testing, analysis of career interests, and assessment of strengths and weaknesses to those students who want this assistance in choosing their academic programs.

VII. GRIEVANCE PROCEDURES

Fair practice requires that students be provided with a variety of channels for registering and discussing their grievances and getting them resolved. Such channels should range from informal mechanisms to handle minor problems as quickly as possible to more formal structures to allow for a hearing and, if necessary, appeals. Descriptive information on existing complaint channels and on procedures for using them should be available to all students. The terms for confidentiality in handling grievances should also be clearly explained.

Examples of Good Practice

The following illustrations are offered as exemplary procedures that might be adapted by each institution to fit its own particular circumstances.

- Review the adequacy of existing grievance procedures, formal and informal, and revise them as necessary to conform with standards of due process and procedural fairness.
- Disseminate policy statements describing the full range of grievance mechanisms available to students, the procedures involved in using them, and the persons whom the student should get in touch with to discuss problems informally or to register a complaint.
- Establish campus-information or other telephone numbers that students can call for advice on the correct procedures for handling particular problems, whether academic or administrative. Other means to make students more aware of available grievance mechanisms -- and to improve their access to needed information, advice, and counseling -- should also be considered and developed.

- o Develop informal complaint mechanisms within each academic department to handle problems arising in connection with its instructional program (e.g., examination policies, grading, faculty conduct).
- o Establish an ombudsman system or a student advocate's office to deal informally with a variety of academic and administrative complaints.
- o Monitor the nature and incidence of student grievances and the problems connected with resolving them effectively. Such an activity might include a periodic review of alternative methods for prompt and equitable resolution of grievances.

VIII. STUDENT SERVICES AND STUDENT CONDUCT

Institutions should provide full and accurate descriptions of the various services available to students under campus-housing, health-services, or other agreements. When changes in such services must take place -- whether in level of services, in fees, or in policy -- adequate notification should be given and equitable adjustments made. Restrictions in the availability of services should be explicitly noted (e.g., restrictions affecting part-time or nondegree students).

Students should also be given full information on institutional policies with respect to student conduct, dress (if any), political activity, and participation in extracurricular activities. Official expectations about student conduct should be clearly described, as should the use of disciplinary proceedings in connection with violations. Efforts should be made to acquaint students with opportunities to participate in formulating policies affecting student activities.

Examples of Good Practice

The following illustrations are offered as exemplary procedures that might be adapted by each institution to fit its own particular circumstances.

- Review current policies and practices with respect to student services to ensure that they are fair and that the services are provided efficiently and in accordance with announced policies and descriptive statements.
- Provide students with accurate and up-to-date information on the services and extracurricular activities available to them, including full explanations of purposes, likely costs, and terms of eligibility.

- Review existing procedures whereby students can participate in planning and developing student services and in formulating policies with respect to student conduct.
- Develop an institutional statement of the rights and responsibilities of students as members of the college community. Such a statement should include a description of the channels available for registering grievances in connection with such rights and responsibilities (see Section VII).

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